

by Connie Mako Miller

David L. Berlet

Story originally appeared in the March 2009 issue of Shotgun Sports © 2009. Visit www.shotgunsportsmagazine.com and request a free issue.

Dave Berlet doesn't remember attending his first Grand American Trapshooting Championships, or even his second. Strange, you think? Actually, it's not surprising, considering this 66-year-old Ohioan entered the Amateur Trapshooting Association homegrounds in Vandalia, Ohio, in the arms of his parents when he had only been on this earth a few short months. You might say his parents fed him a baby formula of shotguns and powder. Dave has continued that diet ever since, attending the last 65 Grand Americans and competing in 52 of them, winning Grand American and Ohio State trophies in all the six decades since 1957. He is a natural-born competitor.

His awards and experiences are exciting, and I'll tell you more about them later. For now, it's Dave's Guinness world record I want to talk about. The year was 1970, and one of the managers of Troy Gun Club in Ohio was Jack Baker, whose children gave him a *Guinness World Record Book* for Christmas. Within its pages, Baker read about an Englishman who set the record for the most targets broken in an hour. Shooting Station-8 birds, the Brit attempted somewhere in the vicinity of 1,405 targets and broke about 1,100 in that one hour.

The Guinness record got Baker thinking and figuring out more than 1,405 targets could be thrown in an hour. He spoke to his co-manager about setting up their own try at the world record. The men approached the club's Remington target distributor and, in turn, the distributor approached Remington about sponsoring a go at the Englishman's Guinness recordsetting score. Remington agreed to sponsor an event and asked for a list of five shooters from which they would choose one to compete. Yes, Dave was among the five and the one ultimately elected to attempt the record.

Dave wasn't sure why, in June of 1971, he was the fellow Remington chose to be the shooter, but he figured although he shot mostly reloads, when he was competing with new ammo, Remington was his brand. In addition, he was the youngest of the five and had the highest 16-yard average in Ohio, a state with a large number of trapshooters. Those factors more than likely led Remington to select Dave as the competitor.

Between that June and the date of the world-record attempt scheduled for September of that year, Dave prepared for the grueling, stamina-straining event by working out with weights. Fifteen-pound weights were held up to his shoulder and then he straightened his arms outward. In addition, Sandy, his wife, crafted two beanbags filled with shot weighing approximately 3½ pounds each. One she sewed onto the back of a right-hand glove Dave wore as he worked out (but not when he shot) and the other was placed on his rib at the muzzle end. The drill began with Dave holding up a gun shouldered as he normally would for any trap shot as he watched the tick, tick, tick of the second hand on the clock. At first, the timepiece only ticked away 60 drawn-out seconds before Dave's arms began to shake from the exertion and then give way. Diligently, he worked every day on the exercises and, by September, that minute increased to four minutes.

During the months Dave was toughening-up, Remington



Photo by Alan Lovelless. Lovelless Fine Photography (www.lovellessphotography.com; 615-890-1558)

configured five 1100s to his stock specifications. I figured Dave had time to practice with the guns and probably a rehearsal for the big event, too, but that was not the case! A quick few minutes on the weekend prior to the real-time record try was the only time Dave shot the 1100s. Since there was no run-through, no one had any idea how things were going to turn out. But they did have a plan.

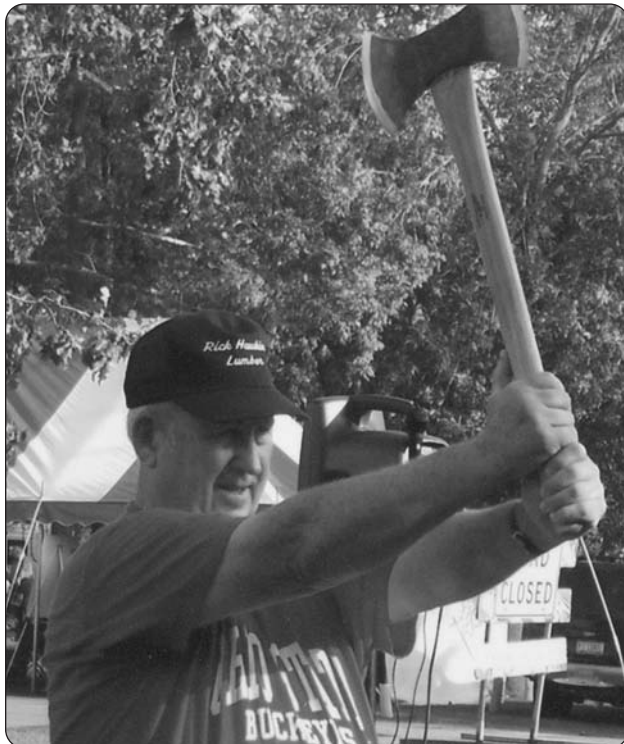
Two skeet traps were mounted inside a traphouse, one next to the other, and birds were thrown alternately from the traps. Dave was to shoot straightaways from the 16-yard line on Post 3 utilizing all five 1100s. There were three people to load them, another guy to pass the gun to Dave and yet another to receive the empty gun. To keep the effort as much like the Englishman's Guinness-record venture as possible, three shells went into each gun. The plan was when Dave mounted the gun and after his head hit the stock, the puller would push the button. On the firing of the gun at the first target, the puller would throw the second target and upon report, throw the third. The city of Troy's Fraternal Order of Police sold tickets to the shoot-out. There were over 500 people in attendance hoping Dave would bust 'em all and bust the record.

All went according to plan as the day proceeded, with the guys loading the guns, passing them to Dave and Dave handing them off. The puller did a good job of throwing the birds on cue. Then, just 10 minutes into it, Dave began to have pain in his hand and struggled until around the 20-minute mark. At that point, a second wind seemed to surround him and things became easier. About 30 minutes or so into the shooting, it was announced Dave had broken more

targets than the Englishman! Dave heard that news and was immediately energized. More minutes went by and more targets were hit, and it was broadcast Dave had shot at more targets than the Englishman. That pumped him up further, and another boost carried him through to the last five minutes of the hour. Getting down to the wire, fatigue set in and Dave felt it strongly, yet he went on. When the 60 minutes had passed, 1,572 birds were hit out of a possible 1,659, Dave had a blister on his hand the size of a silver dollar, and a new world record was set! It appeared in the 1975 *Guinness Book of World Records* (not 1971). Guinness didn't publish the book every year then like they do now. There were articles about Dave's achievement in several national magazines, like the NRA magazine and *Gun Week*, plus local newspapers. Some time later, the record was seen in the *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* section of the newspaper.

What happened to the five Remington 1100s Dave used? They were raffled off and Dave bought one. It was his hunting gun for many years. Remington awarded him with a commemorative model that has never been fired. The plaque on the stock proclaims the new world record and the date. The grass-green color of Remington helped bring about that Guinness record and has played a prominent role in Dave's shooting career. A Remington 870 was his first trap gun and, on and off throughout the many decades of competing, Remington shells were often in his gear bag.

It is interesting to note that Dave has used Full choke, Improved Modified, Modified, several Herb Orr chokes and interchangeable chokes in his barrels behind a number of different shotguns, and his average has not shown any noticeable change. For the most part, the same is true for the guns he's competed with. It just goes to show it's the guy behind the trigger and not the guns, chokes or ammo that makes a super shooter.



Dave enjoys competing in lumberjack events. Here he prepares to throw a double-bladed axe. Just don't drop it, Dave!



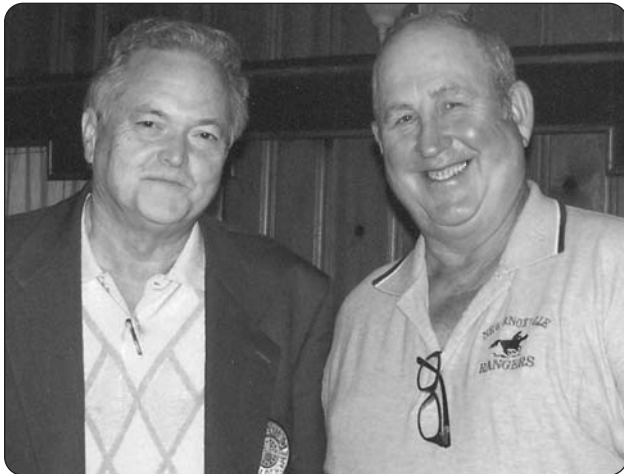
Dave and his greatest supporter, his lovely wife Sandy.

George Berlet, Dave's trapshooting and hunting father and former Vice President of the Ohio State Trapshooting Association, started him out with a Remington 870 with a Full choke. After that, he used a couple Model 12 Winchesters carrying the Herb Orr chokes. A Krieghoff Model K-32 was next, holding an Improved Modified in the bottom barrel. Remington came back into Dave's competitive life when he bought an 870 Competition. That was a single shot with a reducer in the magazine tube and a barrel that was overbored from the factory. After the Remington 870 Competition came a succession of Beretta 682s, the first being purchased around 1983, not long after Beretta introduced them to the market.

Dave has stuck with Beretta ever since, although not with the original 682, which was an under-barrel style. His 682s for Singles and Handicap are top singles with 34" barrels. He has several of them, plus a new gun he is experimenting with that is multi-choked. For Doubles, he uses a 30" over/under barrel. The aforementioned top singles have Tom Wilkinson ribs and Handicap chokes. Wilkinson has backbored and ported the barrels, and an 8-ounce barrel weight has been added, as well as a Country Gentleman pad adjuster (an adjustable recoil-pad assembly).

Aftermarket chokes, Dave believes, are very beneficial, especially for Handicap competition beyond the 25-yard line, as they provide a slightly smaller but more dense pattern from the outside edge all the way to the center. The uniform patterning is a benefit in his book, as opposed to chokes that give patterns centered in the middle, with the outside fringe being more open.

An additional aftermarket product Dave has on his guns is marketed right out of his own home. For a couple decades, Dave has been making adjustable combs. In fact, he has made somewhere over 1,500 of them for shooters around the U.S. The first one was made for his friend and ATA Hall-of-Fame inductee Brad Dysinger (see "Look Who's Talking," June 2002). Initially, Dave's custom-made combs adjusted just up and down; later, he got the super idea of making them four-way adjustable — left, right, up, down. Champions like Phil Kiner ("Look Who's Talking," January 2001), Leo Harrison ("Look Who's Talking," March 2001 and August 2006), Jacque Snellenberger ("Look Who's Talking," May 2003),



Dave with Dr. Lynn Parsons. Lynn's father was the legendary Herb Parsons.

George Snellenberger (July 2003) and, my personal favorite, Gaylord Miller, have all benefited from Dave's combs. This mechanically talented Ohioan also fabricates Delrin™ ribs here over an existing rib. To raise the point-of-impact on his newest Beretta 682, he precisely added a rib made of Delrin™.

When we were talking guns, Dave told me a story about acquiring his Krieghoff Model K-32. At the 1961 Grand, 19-year-old Dave was Runner-Up in the Grand American Handicap Event, having played all the money. The purse paid out \$677.10. Dave had been eyeing Krieghoff's K-32, which sold for \$400 at the time. George Berlet was a gun dealer and gave his son a 25% break, so Dave was able to purchase that

brand-new Krieghoff for \$300, with a serial number of 1464! I got to thinking... a used K-32 can be bought on today's market for a couple grand and, if it is an upgraded model, may be worth as much as \$10,000-\$15,000. I'd say Dave's \$300 was a good investment! He shot that gun until the 1980s.

Earlier I told you Dave had many exciting moments throughout his career. One of those moments came about at the Central Zone Shoot in 1988 as the legendary trapshooter Larry Bumsted and Dave set an ATA shoot-off record of 725 birds. The ATA's Central Zone is made up of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Nebraska, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, North/South Dakota, Wisconsin, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. That year, the Zone was held at Jaqua's in Findlay, Ohio, and the shoot off went like this: On Saturday evening Bumsted and Dave shot 450 targets, ending about 10:00 p.m. squinting through the lights that were not the best, trying to see targets with orange domes, not white. They both broke all of those 450 targets. On Sunday afternoon after the Handicap was completed, they continued with their shoot off. Both broke the first 100 to make it 550 straight, then between 550 and 575, they each missed one. Continuing on, no birds were dropped until Dave missed one between 700 and 725. Bumsted won, and the record is documented on the Trap Hall of Fame website under Bumsted's inductee bio. It was quite a shoot off, long-remembered by everyone who attended.

I asked Dave how in the world he kept his focus through those days of shooting and shoot offs. He replied, "In a shoot off, the hardest thing is getting started. If you can get through the first round or first couple of rounds, you get into a rhythm and keep grinding it out."

David Berlet

Longtime Trap Super Star

Place of birth: Wapakoneta, Ohio

Home: New Knoxville, Ohio

Age: 66

Occupation: Retired. I worked for 30 years as a machine repairman at Goodyear Tire & Rubber in Saint Mary's, Ohio. In my retirement, I make four-way adjustable combs and add-on Delrin™ ribs (e-mail: dsberlet@nktelco.net).

Prior occupation: Prior to the 30 years at Goodyear, I worked at Parker-Hannifin in Saint Mary's, Ohio, where, at the time, they built hydraulic presses. Now they make hydraulic cylinder parts.

First job: I grew up in my dad's farm machinery dealership and general repair garage. I always felt lucky growing up there. I never learned a lot about anything, but I learned just a little bit about a lot of things.

First gun: Remington 870

Mentor: My dad, George Berlet. Also, my brother Ned helped me stay competitive, and Brad Dysinger was a great source of information and help.

Favorite:

TV Show: I do not watch much TV, but I guess it would be Jeff Foxworthy's "Are You Smarter Than A Fifth Grader."

Candy bar: Butterfinger®

Fast Food: Arby's®

Hobbies: The lumberjack sports, bowling, hunting deer and pheasants, mushroom hunting in the spring. Years back, I played competitive softball and did some trapping

for foxes and muskrats.

Exercises: Weights, stretching and leg lifts to keep limber in the off-season

Gun: Beretta 682

Movie: Some of the Hallmark movies on television and old westerns

Actor: Tom Selleck

Shotgun game: In earlier years, it would have been Singles. In later years, my Handicap has gotten better, and I enjoy shooting Doubles, too. So I would say I enjoy all of them equally!

Adult beverage: Bud Light®

Pet: Bandit, an 8-year-old Springer, and Edgar, a 4-year-old Brittany spaniel from Brad Dysinger's Thorn Bottom Kennel

Who you most admire: Brad Dysinger and Leo Harrison

The smartest thing you've done: Married my wife Sandy

Your personal motto: Try to be nice to people and try to keep everything in perspective. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Don't burn bridges behind you.

Your greatest extravagance: Trapshooting

Your greatest fear: Prices will rise so much in the economy I won't be able to afford trapshooting.

Changes to trap you would like to see: I would like to see them go back to more diffi-

cult targets. We need to go back to setting targets to the 50-yard stake and a height bar, rather than fooling around with radar guns and protractors. The Doubles targets need to be set with more spring. I think the scores are too high for the good of the game. It happened in bowling. As bowling got easier, they started losing bowlers. The top shooters are still going to have good scores, but they're not going to have them everyday. The everyday shooter then has a chance. I think it would give the good shooters, rather than just the top shooters, a chance to win. There will always be top shooters that have the good scores, but there will not be as many of them each day. The way it is now, if you can't break a 96 or above, you're not going to get any money back, whereas years ago (i.e., in the late '50s at the Grand American) they figured an 88 or 89 would get you \$40 out of the purse. That would basically pay your entry for that event. That moved up in the '60s to where you had to shoot a 93 to get into the money. It has moved up from there. Then, the target was a little harder to break; the target materials were a little tougher than they are now. Also, I feel mandatory reductions would help the sport a lot, because there are so many people who made it to the 27-yard line and were lucky to get there in the first place who are going to die on the 27-yard line because they will not take a reduction. They're the same people who complain you cannot beat the top shooters.

Grinding it out in another exciting shoot off, Dave was named Clay Target Champion of America at the 2000 Grand. That shoot off wasn't nearly as long, only 75 birds... but long enough, I'm sure! To begin with, there were almost twenty 200-straight that year, and it got down to Mike Blaisdell ("Look Who's Talking," April 2007) and Dave. It wasn't until Blaisdell missed his 23rd bird in the round of three Dave even thought about coming out as champ. A light bulb went on as he realized he had only to break the remaining two targets in the last round of 25. The next light bulb flashed and said "Concentrate on the task at hand and nothing else!" He did and took home the Clay Target Champion of America ring.

Many, many successes have come to Dave and just as many wonderful remembrances. Beginning as a Junior All-American through being named to the 2009 ATA All-American Veteran Team, he has many awards to be proud of. Some came while standing next to family members. Dave and his brother Ned won six Brother/Brother ATA Championships. Stepson Dirk Meckstroth and Dave won 11 Ohio State Trapshooting Association Parent/Child trophies at the Ohio State Shoot and three Parent/Child Championships at the Grand American. Dave and his wife Sandy have two children — Dana Brown and Dirk Meckstroth. They also have two grandchildren.

Let me give you a few more stats: Clay Target Champion of America; ATA Grand Slam completed in 1995; 4-time High Ohio 16-yard average leader, maintaining a 99% or above for nine different years; 1961 Grand American Runner-Up; 78 200x200s and 597 100x100s on 16-yard targets; All-American Team member in 1959, 1960, 1968,

1969, 2008 and 2009; inducted into the Ohio State Trapshooting Hall of Fame in 1995. Not including 2008, Dave has won 32 Grand American trophies. Competitiveness must run in the family. Dave and Sandy's grandchildren — Tiffany Dixon and Dale Brown — along with Tiffany's husband Jeremy Dixon, competed in an Ironman Triathlon at Lake Placid, New York, this past summer and placed well.

Throughout all the years, I wondered if there was any target that kept creeping out of his sights. From day to day and post to post, Dave told me, it varies, but over the course of his career he cannot say he has had one particular target that continually came back to bother him. He said he would start having a hitch or something that wasn't quite right, get that straightened out, then something else popped up. That's how shooting goes — back and forth. "Shooting good is a real fine line," Dave said. "You wander back and forth across that line, and the days you shoot really well are the days you keep wandering very close to that line."

From my perspective, Dave Berlet has rarely wandered much across that line into the no-hit zone. He believes that is, in part, due to some luck. The old saying goes "I'd rather be lucky than good." Dave is good and makes his own luck. After reading his bio with a list of awards that filled nine typewritten pages, I think you'll agree when I say, "What's luck got to do with it?"

SS

Connie Mako Miller's shooting career began in 1969 with trapshooting lessons at the Winchester Club in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1988, she attained ATA Lady High Handicap Average in Ohio, 8th in the U.S. She was chosen for the NSCA All-American Team two times, four times Michigan State Lady Champ, five times Ohio State Lady Champ and Runner-Up in the NSCA National Champion of Champions in 1993. She began writing for *Shotgun Sports* in March, 1997.

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